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White House backpedaling or prediction of 2.6 million new

By Ken Moritsugu Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON - The White House on Wednesday struggled to get its economic messac shied away from its prediction last week that the U.S. economy would add 2.6 million

In a testy exchange with reporters, White House spokesman Scott McClellan refused to the administration still stood behind the projection, which was made in the annual Eco of the President and submitted to Congress with President Bush's signature.

"People can debate the numbers all they want, but the president's going to be looking numbers of jobs being created," McClellan said.

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Many economic forecasters scoffed at the administration's projection, generated by the Council of Economic Advisers, as overly optimistic. The prediction could be politically e the job market remains sluggish at the time of the November election.

The administration's handling of the issue could also fuel Democratic criticism that Bus about the unemployed. Democratic presidential front-runner John Kerry, the Massachi jumped on the latest statements.

"George Bush is saying he's going to create 2.6 million jobs this year alone, and his ac saying, `What, you didn't actually believe that, did you?" Kerry said at a town hall me Dayton, Ohio. "Apparently George Bush is the only person left in the country who actu the far-fetched promises he's peddling."

Bush wants to sound upbeat about the economy as he seeks re-election, but he risks stouch with the unemployed. Democrats are quick to point out that the economy has lo jobs since he took office.

"The White House is caught in trying to maintain an optimistic outlook when things are necessarily peachy for everyone in the country," said Nathan Gonzales, the political ed

Rothenberg Political Report, a Washington-based newsletter.

The retreat from the jobs prediction reflects how touchy and important the issue is to election prospects, said Bruce Buchanan, a presidential scholar at the University of Texas (1997).

"It signals some confusion about how to be portraying this sensitive issue," he said. "I sorting it out."

Reporters asked Treasury Secretary John Snow on Tuesday about the 2.6 million job p during his trip to Oregon and Washington state to promote the administration's job-cre

"I think we are going to create a lot of jobs. How many I don't know, but we're going on it," Snow said.

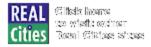
Gregory Mankiw, the chairman of the president's Council Of Economic Advisers, didn't case when he said last week that jobs moving offshore "is probably a plus for the econ long run."

Many workers blame offshoring for the loss of American jobs.

Bush distanced himself from Mankiw's remarks last week, and Mankiw on Tuesday call "injudiciously worded comments."

"I learned an important lesson from that experience: Economists and noneconomists s different languages," he said in a speech to economists. "The two languages share ma common, but they are often interpreted in different ways."





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